Duke of Edinburgh will Wander

By Sir Harry Luke

Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Fiji and High Commissioner for the Western Pacific; from 1938 to 1942.

OFF the BEATEN TRACK

In the course of his second round-the-world tour, lasting three months from January 20, the Duke of Edinburgh will pay short visits in the Pacific, to the Solomon Islands, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands and to Christmas Island. In this article, Sir Harry Luke—a former governor of Fiji and high commissioner for the Western Pacific—tells something of these islands and their peoples.

THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH already had experience of Pacific Islands and islanders when, with Queen Elizabeth II, he visited Fiji—Britain's senior colony in the South Seas—and the Kingdom of Tonga during the Royal Tour of 1953. On his present tour he will be able to penetrate deeper into Pacific life, for he will be seeing something of the Solomon and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, groups far removed from the beaten track.

Apart from the fact that they are now almost entirely Christian, the inhabitants of these islands maintain their own ways of life still largely unchanged by European influences.

In land area the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (it was established and proclaimed between the years 1893 and 1900) is one of the most extensive groups of the Pacific. It consists of the six biggish islands of San Cristoval, Guadalcanal, Malaita, Ysabel, New Georgia and Choiseul, a score of islands of medium size and literally unnumbered small islands and islets, with a few atolls on the periphery.

The larger islands are of the volcanic, mountainous type and form a double row, south-east and northwest, for 900 miles. The population of the volcanic islands is Melanesian and the Solomon Islander spans a wide gamut of physical types, ranging from small, almost pygmy-like tribes in some of the southern islands to the sturdy Malaitaman and the fine, upstanding people of the Bougainville Straits, probably the most heavily pigmented race in the world. Almost half the total population of over 100,000 souls inhabits Malaita, fourth largest island of the protectorate.

The Solomon Islands, one of the first of the major groups of the Pacific to become known to Europeans, were discovered in 1568 by the Spaniard Mendana while on a voyage from Peru to seek new colonies for the Spanish crown.

Carried away by their natural beauty and tropical luxuriance, Mendana, on his return, published enthusiastic accounts of this land of plenty, which he named "the Isles of Solomon, to the end that the Spaniards, supposing them to be those isles whence Solomon fetched gold to adorn the Temple in Jerusalem, might be the more desirous to go and inhabit the same."

Their natural beauty reaches its highest level in the great lagoons of Marovo and Roviana, off the northern and southern coasts of New Georgia.

The protectorate is rich in coconuts—the principal industry—and also exports trochus shell, used in the manufacture of pearl buttons. It is directly administered, with the aid of an advisory council, by the high commissioner for the Western Pacific, who also has jurisdiction over the Gilbert and Ellice Islands and, from the British side, over the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides. The capital was transferred, after the world war, from Tulagi to the more convenient Honiara on Guadalcanal.

Large parts of the group were much ravaged by the Japanese during the war, but the Solomon Islanders gave the most loyal help and support to the members of the administration, who withdrew into the jungle of the interior, and to the Commonwealth and American relieving forces. Despite the freely profered enemy bribes and threats, not a single islander betrayed his trust, and several were decorated for conspicuous gallantry, notably Sergeant-Major Vouza, the story of whose heroism has become epic.

TO THE SOLOMON ISLANDS the Gilbert and Ellice Islands afford a complete contrast, for they are all coral atolls and their total land area is only 370 square miles—one half of which is contributed by Christmas Island, the colony's easternmost and the Pacific's largest atoll—whereas its land and sea areas combined cover 2,600,000 square miles. It has probably the greatest proportion of sea to land of any political unit in the world and is also the only territory in the world to straddle both the equator and the international date line.

The Gilbertese are Micronesians; the Ellice Islanders are Polynesians. The two peoples speak, therefore, different languages and they also differ in temperament: the Gilbertese are inclined to be reserved whereas the Ellice Islanders are probably the most exuberant and vivacious of all Polynesians. Their high spirits, however, owe nothing to the bounties of nature for, as readers of the late Sir Arthur Grimble's "Pattern of Islands" and its unhappily posthumous sequel will be aware, the life of the atoll-dweller is a hard and sometimes a precarious one. Apart from two palms, the coconut and the pandanus, nothing grows easily, and even the one coarse tuber has to be cultivated in pits excavated from the sand and coral rock.

A RESIDENT COMMISSIONER, subordinate to the high commissioner for the Western Pacific, administers the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony from his headquarters at Tarawa. In his task he is greatly aided by the islanders themselves, who politically are remarkably advanced for primitive peoples. In each of their atolls they have evolved an admirable form of self-government, with native magistrates, headmen, scribes and local police force; this organization which, in essentials, pre-dates the advent of the European, now functions under British administration with a maximum of efficiency and the minimum of European guidance.

The Gilbertese and Ellice Islanders are gifted and artistic people, who find their highest form of self-expression in dancing. In their timing, their sense of rhythm, their perfection of execution, they have developed a technique not inferior to that of the best dancing of Europe and Eastern Asia.

The Duke of Edinburgh will not only visit Christmas Island in the extreme east of the colony, discovered by Captain Cook on Christmas Eve, 1777, and now used (it has normally no settled population) for nuclear tests; he will also visit Ocean Island in the extreme west. Here he will see the phosphate and the manner in which it is worked by the British Phosphate Commission. Unfortunately, he will not see the Banabans, the Micronesian tribe who, before the war, were Ocean Island's indigenous inhabitants; for those who survived the Japanese occupation and departing bombardment have been re-settled in the Fijian island of Rambi.

On the outbreak of the last war, when I was in office in the Pacific, the Banabans (who then numbered 400 adults and 750 souls in all) sent me a message that they were placing £10,000 (their currency was the Australian pound) at the disposal of the United Kingdom Government as a contribution to British war funds. I demurred that this was a disproportionately generous gift from so small a community. They replied that they could not agree to reduce the figure below £10,000, but that the gift would now be made in pounds sterling, which brought it up to £12,500 in their currency. They were insistent, they said, "that this gift, which represents the unanimous will of the whole Banaban community, should be accepted as a token of their loyalty to His Majesty and the cause of the British government under whose protection they have lived since 1901."

Once these war canoes were paddled on fierce forays, but now the men of the Western Solomons have adapted them to peaceful purposes. Such canoes will almost certainly greet the Duke of Edinburgh during his around-the-world tour.

TALE of TRAGEDY (Continued)

(Continued from Page 12)

THE PASSENGER STEAMER Valencia, inbound from San Francisco to Victoria, was wrecked near Pachena Point, about eight miles from Cape Beale, on Jan. 23, 1906. Of the 154 persons on board, 117 perished.

Wrecked on the same Seabird Islands, on Jan. 22, 1922, was the four-masted American schooner Soquel. All were saved, except the captain's wife, who was killed when the mizzenmast fell on her as the ship heeled over after hitting the reef. The vessel was a total loss.

Seabird Islands, on Jan. 2, 1923, claimed the lives of 11 Victoria men, the entire crew of the small coastal freighter Alaskan, which had sailed from Victoria on New Year's Day for up-coast points. She also was a total loss.

The same group of small islands, better described as a barren reef, in 1937 claimed the Greek freighter Nereus, and in October, 1943, the Russian freighter Uzberistan. Capital Iron Works Ltd. of Victoria salvaged 100 tons of equipment from the former, before she finally broke in two and sank. The crew of the Uzberistan was taken off by another Russian freighter, before she, too, slid into deep water. No lives were lost in either of these two wrecks.

The Canadian barque Sarah was wrecked a few miles farther to the east on Nov. 8, 1891, and, near where the Valencia went ashore, the American schooner Robert E. Lewers was lost with all hands in February, 1923.

As mentioned earlier, listed are only those vessels wrecked on, or in the immediate vicinity of Barkley Sound, 22 in number. Another 28, at least, are known to have been wrecked between Pachena Point and Port Renfrew, almost one for every mile of coastline. And, referred to in other articles of this series, are some of those which occurred further to the west.

To the estimated (and conservative) total of 70, still must be added the unidentified wrecks, probably a score. Also, those vessels which foundered in this neighborhood, the number of which will never be known, bringing the grim total of major marine disasters on the west coast of Vancouver Island close to the 100 mark.